

12-1-2015

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### Recommended Citation

Thorsell, Elisabeth (2015) "Oliver Wendell Holmes--the archivist," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 35 : No. 4 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol35/iss4/7>

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# Oliver Wendell Holmes – the archivist

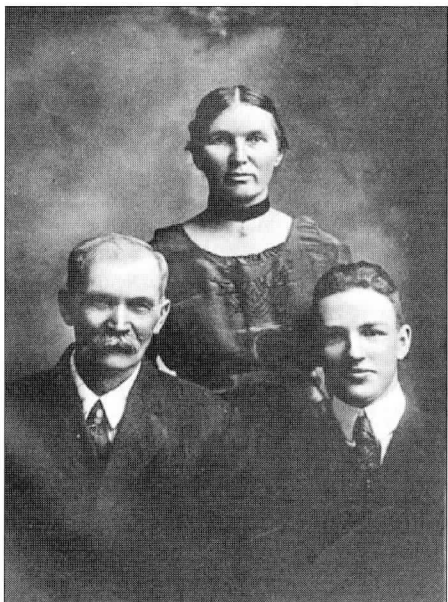
## He started to save family history as a young man

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

In SAG 2015:2 an article was published under the title “Ben Benson’s story of the Swede Bottom Settlement” which was based on notes taken by Ben’s grandson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who as a young man saw the value of saving his grandfather’s (*morfar*) remembrances as a lad in Sweden, the family immigration, and life as a settler.

Oliver’s father’s name was Henry A. Holmes, born 21 Nov. 1858 in Backa, Värö parish (Hall.), son of the sharecropper Anders Andersson (b. 27 June 1824 in Backa, Värö), and his wife Johanna Orup. Henry’s Swedish name was Henrik Andersson, and he came to the U.S. in 1870 with his mother and siblings; the father and oldest brother had come in 1869.

In 1880 he was a single man, with surname Holmes, in Houston in Houston Co., MN, and a farmhand to Charles A. Benson. His employer had a daughter, Ida, a few years younger than Henry. They married, but had



Henry A. Holmes, wife Charlotte J., and son Oliver Wendell Holmes. (Picture from 1919 *History of Houston County*).

no children. Ida died on 18 July 1898. The following year Henry remarried 25 Aug. 1899 in Houston to Ida’s cousin Charlotte J. Benson, born 1876 in Minnesota, daughter of Ben Benson and his wife Christina Inger Nilson.

Their son Oliver Wendell was born 2 Feb. 1902 in St. Paul, Ramsey Co., MN. The family lived as farmers at Money Creek in Houston County. Oliver went to school at Carleton College in Northfield, MN, from where he graduated in 1922. Next he continued his studies at Columbia University, and while there became an assistant in the map and American history rooms of the New York Public Library.

It was during his summer breaks in the 1920s that he interviewed his grandfather Ben Benson. Ben Benson’s wife Christina died 22 Jan. 1929, and Ben himself on 25 Jan. 1925.

Oliver W. Holmes was hired by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for two years where he wrote 400 articles on American history and biography. Next, he joined the staff of the Columbia University Press, and continued to write about history and biography. At this time he also started a research project to study the stagecoaches, a project that became his great interest during the rest of his life. This ended with his dissertation in 1956 on “Stagecoach and Mail from Colonial Days to 1820.”

In 1935 Oliver Holmes was hired by the then new National Archives, where he was chief of the Interior Department archives, and then director of research and records description, program advisor, chief of the Natural Resources Records Branch, and executive director of the

National Historical Publications Commission. In this position he helped promote and provide financing for the publication of more than 300 volumes of documentary records and papers of important figures in American history. They included Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson, and Booker T. Washington.

He retired in 1972, but did not stop researching and writing.

During the years he published many articles in the *American Archivist*, the journal of the Society of American Archivists, and elsewhere. His everlasting interest in Western history resulted in such articles as *Indian-Related Records in the National Archives and Their Use* (1976).

Oliver W. Holmes had in 1927 married Dorothy Behner, and they had two children, Benson and Helena. Both Dorothy and Oliver W. Holmes passed away in 1981.

*(Information on Oliver Holmes’s career: American Archivist/Spring 1982, and New York Times 27 Nov. 1981).*

Houston County Historical Society, Caledonia, Minnesota, provided the article by Oliver W. Holmes that was published in SAG 2015:2.

They also provided the picture of Oliver W. Holmes and his parents, scanned from 1919 *History of Houston County*, published by the H.C. Cooper Jr. and Co., Winona, MN, 1919.

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